

Gladdening the Mind

Place on the path

Satipaṭṭhāna		Ānāpānasati
Breathing	BODY	<i>Discerns:</i> whether breathing in & out long or short breaths
Postures		<i>Trains:</i> Breathing sensitive to entire body
Activities		
Anatomical parts		
Elements		
Corpse in decay		
	FEELINGS	Breathing calming bodily fabrication
Pleasant		Sensitive to piti & sukha
Unpleasant		Sensitive to mental fabrications
Neutral		Calming mental fabrications
	MIND	
With/without: Passion		Sensitive to the mind
Aversion		<i>Gladdening the mind</i>
Delusion		Steadying the mind
Restricted / scattered		Releasing the mind
Enlarged / not enlarged		
Surpassed / unsurpassed		
Concentrated / not concentrated		
Released / not released		
5 Hindrances	DHAMMAS	<i>Focusing on:</i>
5 Aggregates		Inconstancy
6 Sense spheres		Dispassion
7 Factors of awakening		Cessation
4 Noble truths		Relinquishment

‘Gladdening the mind’ is a stage in the ‘mind’ section of the Ānāpānasati Sutta, the sutta describing the entire path to awakening in terms of mindfulness of the breath. The section describes the meditator as breathing, “sensitive to the mind ... gladdening the mind ... steadying the mind [and] releasing the mind. Bear in mind that ‘mind’ in this sense means the emotions as well as verbal thought.

This practice described below is a way of following through these stages. We begin by paying attention to the current state of our mind, then use techniques that develop a more positive, enjoyable mind. Regular practice of this helps to steady the mind. ‘Releasing the mind’ means releasing it from habitual unskillful mental and emotional patterns, which can involve the brahma vihara meditations and other techniques.

The meditation

We begin by being sensitive to the mind: observing what is there at present. Throughout we remain aware of the body and if we notice patterns of tension in the body associated with thoughts or feelings that arise at any stage we can use the techniques learned in body mindfulness to relax them. This is described in the Ānāpānasati Sutta as ‘calming the bodily formations’.

Gladdening the Mind

We can use various techniques to help us to be sensitive to the mind:

1. Run through the qualities listed by the Buddha in the Satipaṭṭhāna (foundations of mindfulness) Sutta or have your own checklist. Is the mind dull or energetic, focussed or distracted, creative or stuck in certain patterns?
2. Think back through the last day or several days. What happened? What did you feel as a result? How did the mind react?

Next, we use various techniques that help us to develop positive, focussed, energetic states of mind. These are not described in the Ānāpānasati Sutta but we can use practices drawn from elsewhere in the Tipiṭaka and from modern research. The Aberdeen Buddhist Group version uses two, but there is nothing to stop you from using others. Any technique is suitable so long as it leads away from, not towards, dependence on external situations and clinging to ideas.

The first technique is to use our skills in mindfulness to bring to mind and keep in mind a situation in which our mind was in a positive state: happy, not dull or scattered and not overly affected by clinging aversion or delusion. Try to flesh out the situation as much as possible. Stay aware of both the body and the mind as you do so and notice how they react. Enjoy any positive feelings and allow yourself to smile. Use both the situation and the reaction of the mind and body as objects of mindfulness, returning your attention to them if it wanders off.

The second technique is to bring to mind the good qualities of beings: both our self and other beings. It is important to realise that this is a mindfulness practice. All beings have a mix of positive and negative qualities. We are using mindfulness skills to bring the positive ones to mind and keep them there, not pretending that the negative ones do not exist. In the Anguttara Nikaya (5:162) the Buddha describes the importance of dwelling in the good qualities of beings, from those who have many of them to those who have very few. In the Visuddhimagga meditation manual, Buddhagosa lists the contemplation of the positive qualities of various beings amongst the ‘ten recollections’ (anussati). Modern research has shown that the practice strengthens the activity of the vagus nerve, which is involved in calming us back down quickly after the ‘fight or flight’ adrenalin response. This has benefits for overall mental health, heart health and immune function (see the handout on ‘The Science of metta bhavana’).

This technique is simple: we bring various beings to mind and pay attention to those qualities that they have that we find positive and admirable. We can use the four categories of people (our self, a good friend, a neutral person and a difficult person) or just allow people to come to mind naturally. If we use the four categories we can either start with our self or with a friend, but do not miss out your self. As with the previous technique, enjoy any positive feelings and allow yourself to smile. Use both the situation and the reaction of the mind and body as objects of mindfulness, returning your attention to them if it wanders off.

When to use the practice

Gladdening the mind can be used as a start to other meditations, such as mindfulness of the breath or an of the brahma viharas. It can also be used on its own as a practice which is enjoyable and beneficial in its own right or as an antidote to negative states of mind. Paying attention to the way the mind reacts can be used as an insight meditation. As well as being practiced as a sitting meditation, sensitivity to the mind and the ability to gladden the mind are useful throughout the day.